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ABSTRACT

This newsletter reviews two books about family literacy in the United States. The first, "A Survey of Family Literacy in the United States" (edited by Lesley Mandel Morrow, Diane H. Tracey, and Caterina Marcone Maxwell), is a reference guide for educators and policymakers that includes the following: brief descriptions of programs for children and intergenerational programs; a list of addresses of agencies and organizations promoting family literacy; a summary of the recent history of family literacy in the United States; and a short, current bibliography on family literacy. The second book reviewed, "Family Literacy: Connections in Schools and Communities" (edited by Lesley Mandel Morrow), is designed for teachers and administrators and contains the following: a collection of articles that describe a wide variety of programs in great detail; learning activities; documents to use in collecting data; and bibliographies. Included along with the brief overviews of the two books are a definition of family literacy; broad conceptual understandings developed in the books; and selected bits of information regarding family literacy that were culled from the works. (MN)

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Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research In Adult Literacy

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A Survey of Family Literacy in the United States

Edited by Lesley Mandel Morrow, Diane H. Tracey, and Caterina Marcone Maxwell. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1995

Family Literacy: Connections in Schools and Communities

Edited by Lesley Mandel Morrow. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1995

Books reviewed by Connie Sapin, Educational Consultant

Recently, a friend who sits on a library board told me that he wants to interest other board members in a library-based literacy program. I strongly recommended these two books to him. I also plan to share the books with a new Even Start program with which I am working. If you find yourself described below, you, too, will probably want to read both books:

- a member of an organization that is interested in developing a family literacy program.
- a supervisor or teacher in an existing literacy program for adults or children that seeks to add a family literacy component.
- a family literacy program provider who is looking for ways to improve current practice.
- a grant writer who needs to support program design with research documentation.
- a curious professional who wants to know more about what is happening in other parts of the country.

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Just What Is Family Literacy?

These two books about family literacy have several common themes. An important one is the focus on building a definition for family literacy, which the International Reading Association's Family Literacy Commission (sponsor of both books) defines as "the ways parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in the community." Additional broad conceptual understandings developed in the books include:

- the critical role of the family in the development of literacy.
- the benefits accrued by both parents and children who participate in family literacy activities.
- the theoretical trend away from a deficit model ("What skills do parents/ children lack?") and toward a model that recognizes and supports home literacy activities that vary from culture to culture and that are different from school literacy activities.

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Both books also describe a variety of actual family literacy programs throughout the U.S. Reading these descriptions helps us understand what family literacy classes may "look like" and how they are different from other adult learning programs. Most family literacy programs feature the following activities:

- Parents and children interact in direct literacy activities, such as reading books or playing games.
- Parents work on their own literacy goals separately from their children.
- Parents use literacy skills to solve problems at home and in their communities.
- Parents participate in their children's schooling.
- Parents seek help with their concerns about parenting.
- Parents develop and convey pride in their home language and culture.

Brief Overview of the Books

Despite these similarities, the books are different in scope and tone. The Survey is a reference guide for educators and policy makers. It provides brief program descriptions, which include focus on programs for children as well as programs for intergenerational participants. A list of addresses of agencies and organizations promoting family literacy enables interested readers to write for additional information.

The Survey also summarizes the recent history of family literacy in the United States. This succinctly written historical information will be very valuable to grant writers. The final section of the book presents a short, reasonably current bibliography on family literacy.

In contrast, the articles collected in Family Literacy describe a wide variety of programs in greater detail. Both teachers and administrators will be interested in reading these descriptions. Readers will find activities to try out, documents to use for collecting data, and bibliographies to use to pursue topics further.

Additional Information and Observations

The following are random bits of information culled from the books.

- Even though low-literacy parents often distrust schools, they have positive images of literate people as those who (a) have status, (b) are employed, (c) contribute money and knowledge to the family, (d) have a sense of purpose, (e) can communicate in any setting, and (f) know community resources and how to obtain them. Discussions of images like these, which are based on personal experiences, may help parents set goals and develop beliefs about literacy for themselves and their children.
- Parents who were not read to as children do not fully understand teachers' requests that they read to their children. Several articles address the need to model and practice specific strategies to make the read-aloud experience effective, whether the parent or the child reads.
- Evaluation is the weakest aspect of family literacy programs. Both parents and children show improved attitudes toward learning; children show gains in literacy ability. However, adults show only modest improvement in literacy skills. These findings may be the result of the lack of adequate instruments designed especially to measure adult gains in family literacy settings.

- When elementary teachers work with family literacy programs, they develop at-home activities that involve both parent and child.

- Rewards and incentives should be related to objectives; books and literacy-related items work best as prizes.

According to the Survey, the future for family literacy programs "looks bright." However, the current rescissions and threatened cuts in federal funding for education and welfare programs and the proposed transfer of federal funds to the states in the form of block grants create new anxiety about the future of family literacy programs. As we deal with these rapid changes, we should recall Elsa Auerbach's statement from Family Literacy:

> [blaming families] may serve an important ideological function of deflecting attention away from the very conditions that give rise to literacy problems--poverty, unemployment, and inadequate health care and housing. Suggesting that enhanced family literacy interactions will break the cycle of poverty or compensate for problems facing the educational system only reinforces the ideology that blames poor people for their own problems and leaves social inequities intact. [p. 23]

Family literacy has been a successful addition to educational programming. Let's hope that it continues to grow.

Morrow, L. M. (Ed.). (1995). Family Literacy: Connections in schools and communities. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. ISBN 0-87207-131-6. Book #127; members $14.00; non-members $21.00

Morrow, L. M., Tracey, D. H., & Maxwell, C. M. (Eds.). (1995). A survey of family literacy in the United States. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. ISBN 0-87207-127-8. Book #131; members $9.00; non-members $14.00

To order books, call the International Reading Association at 1-800-336-READ, ext. 266. Above prices do not include shipping/handling.

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